The farmer's work in the gardens does not end with the "landing of the potatoes." Mangels and turnips and whatever grains he may grow must be planted, the soil prepared for them, and the growing crop weeded and tended. With the planting of the turnips, the last crop to be "put down," often as late as early June, his planting season is over.

With the return of warm weather and the drying off of the land, Irish summer begins. May is the first summer month. And by early May the bogs are dry enough to allow turf cutting to begin. The farmer must ordinarily find time between plantings to cut his year's supply of fuel and stack it into "reeks" to dry under the summer warmth. The turf cutting, though not connected with growing plants or animals, is an indispensable farm activity and takes its place among the never varying tasks of the agricultural round.

Once the turf is cut and stacked, the fruits of the farmer's labor begin to appear. His first crop is cabbage which was planted in a small garden near the house at odd free times during the early spring. Cabbage is practically the only green vegetable of the small farm diet, and the old people remember "Hungry July" or July *an chabdiste* when a delayed potato crop might condemn them to a month or more of semistarvation in which cabbage was the only food. Today new varieties of potatoes have been introduced which mature as early as late June.

The mature potatoes mark no harvest. They are left in the ground to be turned out of the ridges with spade or plough as occasion for them demands. Not until late November will the last of them be dug up.

The first true harvest and the most important one of the year is the haymaking. The cutting of hay begins in late July or early August. It is not only the most important activity of the year, insuring a year-long supply of fodder for the farm animals and the income-producing cattle, but it is

1:Arensberg & Kimball E-5 (1932-1934) 1940
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County Clare

the division of labor between males and females is regarded as corresponding to the natural propensities of the two sexes. That a man should concern himself with a woman's work, such as the sale of eggs or the making of butter, is the subject of derisive laughter, while a woman's smaller hands make it "natural" for her to be a better hand at milking the cows.

Even when the communal labor of the family is demanded and women take their place in bog, garden, and meadow, a definite role is assigned them. Usually it is the lighter tasks which are known as women's work. There is no formal taboo confining a woman to women's work. Heavy work is merely felt to be a hardship upon her. At the potato planting the women do the arduous work of planting the sprouts which they have prepared, bending over to put them into the ridges prepared by the men. They do their share, if necessary, of cultivating, but they are not generally accustomed to the spade, which like the plough, the harrow, the mower, scythe, and turf "slan" is regarded as a masculine implement. At the potato lifting they go along behind the man who turns the potatoes out of the ridge with spade and plough, and pick them up. At the haymaking, the pitching, raking, and some of the building of the haycocks are left to them. But the mowing, especially where it involves the horse-drawn mowing machine, and the building of the rick in the haggard, are masculine skills. In all cases of field work of this sort the role of the woman is usually auxiliary. The same holds in turf cutting. The men do the actual cutting in the bog trenches, while the women knead the peat into briquets and pile it for drying.

The many attitudes and beliefs which surround this type of division of labor illustrate again the socially determined character of the distinctions and their genesis in the intersexual relationship. Just as the man's work is the harder, the more various, and the wider in scope, so the attitudes express a greater valuation of the men's work within the

1:Arensberg & Kimball E-5 (1932-1934) 1940
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CUTTING TURF WITH THE SLÁN

[Facing p 731

1:Arensberg & Kimball E-5 (1932-1934) 1940
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a widespread industry among the country people throughout Ireland. There seems even then to have been quite a widespread cottage industry in wool and linen, later to be destroyed everywhere except in Ulster. The peasantry displayed great ingenuity at the craft. The wool of their sheep was made into frieze at home, carded, spun, woven, dyed, and consumed there.[1] Oils essential to the weaving process were extracted from fern roots, and dyes were got from alder, walnut, oak, and elderberry. This craft survives today as a cottage industry only in remote parts of Donegal and Kerry and in the Scottish highlands and isles. Such home-spinning was once widespread, probably universal. It survived here and there down to a very late date. In Ulster and northern England the industry was gradually brought into the factory, where it laid the foundation for the industrial revolution. But in the rest of Ireland industrial production of woolens was confined to Dublin by 1840 and, as a commercial enterprise, the wool trade was dead except in the region of Belfast. A few small factories survived in several towns, for example at Limerick, Clonmel, and Bandon, but there was no life or power of expansion in them.

Other manufactures originally native to the country repeat the story of wool. A few attempts at cotton manufacture died out. Linen suffered the same fate. At one time flax was grown extensively throughout Ireland, and a home industry of weaving linen was practiced widely in both town and countryside in many parts of the country. O'Brien[2] cites evidence that the older custom in linen making, strongest in Ulster, but not unknown elsewhere, by which weavers occupied plots of land and supplemented their income by farming, was gone by the famine time.

[1] George O'Brien, *The Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine* (London, New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1921). See also O'Brien, *The Economic History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin and London: Maunsel & Company, Ltd., 1918).

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

172 311 351 been discovered under many feet of peat. Several types can be recognized, for example those with upright stones at intervals, which are sometimes left as "standing stones" after the intervening walls have been removed. Old field fences at Cush, Co. Limerick, claimed to be contemporary with raths of the late Bronze Age and "essentially similar to those built by an Irish farmer of to-day" have been described by Professor O'Riordain. This appears to be a striking example of continuity, for the fences are closely followed by existing field-boundaries. Since they lie some 800 ft. above sea-level they do not invalidate the general picture I shall draw in the following chapter, but it is clear that much more work on the lines followed at Cush is required.

351 314 137 [231] Hedges of whins (that is, gorse or furze) about the farmstead are much prized not only for the shelter they afford to stock—they are dense and do not drip—but because they form an admirable clothes line on washing day and a ready source of kindling wood. Formerly the young whin shoots were crushed and fed to horses. The heavy wooden maul and stone block used in the process may still be seen occasionally. It would require years of enquiry and observation to describe and classify the types of sod ("scraw") earth and stone fences which now parcel out the Irish soil into its patchwork of small fields. One may easily recognize the sod ditches of the rich grazing lands of Meath, with their tall thorn hedges and ash trees giving shelter to the cattle, the well-built dry-stone walls of the granite mountain slopes which vainly seek to stop the black-faced sheep, and the loose lace-like walls precariously constructed out of rough boulders in the morainic hills.

351 311 137 In the wind-swept mountains and along the coasts the ditches are hedgeless, carrying only a tangle of heather or whins and an occasional stunted tree, but throughout the lowlands the prevailing type of fence is a stone-faced bank of sods, in the side of which quick-thorn is planted (Fig. 10). These are cut back ruthlessly at longish intervals and are never pleached in the English way, so that the hedge is full of gaps. Occasion-

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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rotation grass is referred to as upland hay to distinguish it from meadow hay, although in fact it often grows at lower levels. Sometimes at this stage the hay is hung on bushes and fences something after the Scandinavian manner. 246

When sufficiently dry the laps are opened and the hay piled into small cocks (ricks or lumps), and this process is repeated a number of times if the weather is bad until the stage of large hand-cocks is reached, or, if the hay is in good condition, even larger "tramp-cocks," trodden down firmly. The cocks are tied down with a hay-rope made on the spot (Fig. 50) and left "to season" for a period which may be only a week or two but which, to the stranger, seems generally an unconscionable time. In this matter the Irish

[283]

Fig. 50.

are confirmed in what the English call their lazy ways. Admittedly there are dry years when it would do no harm to the hay to stack it at once, but the Irish method is adapted to the average season, and rooted in a firmly-fixed rota of farm work. In August the turf must be carried home while the bogs are firm enough to take the carts, and in many parts the busy time of flax-pulling and retting is come. Although these alternative demands on the farmer's time are not always present, they may have helped in the past to standardize the rotation of work. Moreover, when the opportunity of carry- 492 246

[314]

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOG.

314 I have called this chapter " the Bog " rather than " Turf " because fuel is not the only product of the Irish turf bogs. The rough grazings once so important in mountain economy (Chapter 6) are commonly located on thin peat, while " buried treasure " is obtained in the form of bog-timber and also, it may be, in objects of wood or metal lost or deposited in the turf in ancient times. Measured by the time and labour of cutting, footing, stacking, and carrying, turf is an expensive fuel. At best, work in the bogs involves a constant struggle against water-logging underfoot and mists and rain overhead: at the worst there comes an occasional season wetter than usual when little or no turf can be won, and the bare countryside must be searched for sticks and rotting timber to burn. [237] In these circumstances dried cowdung is often used as fuel. [372] Moreover, the heavy drain upon all available hands comes in early summer, and the growing crops and livestock are liable to be neglected. " A great impediment to good husbandry," is the verdict of one writer.

The turf is cut in a normal year from the beginning of May onwards, or as soon as the potatoes and corn are in the ground, but the great thing is to begin as early as possible in [132] order to profit from the dry weather of spring. In districts where few crops are grown April, the driest month of the year, is the chosen time. A current of excitement runs through

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

314 the homestead as preparations are made to visit the bog, which may lie at any distance up to some miles away. I fancy turf-cutting was one of the tasks undertaken in the old days by the young people who took the cattle to the booleys. It used to be a communal task, for instance in Donegal until lately [476] six or eight men with their women and child helpers would pool their labour, receiving their meals for the day from the owner of each successive bank to be cut. Similarly each man would take his burden-creel to assist in the communal gathering and stacking in July or August.

Fig. 83. The flachter in use, Coolnagoppoge, Co. Antrim.

Fig. 84. Flachter in "at rest" position.

The first process in turf-cutting is the removal of the surface "parings"—the scraw—consisting of tough matted roots, coarse grass and moss, to a depth of anything from three or four inches to as much as 18 inches. The scraw is not taken as fuel except in areas where turf is scarce, but in some localities where the bogs have all been cut out, as in Rathlin and Tory, thin scraw scraped off the rock is the only fuel, and a very dirty and inefficient fire it makes. A broad spade is employed for paring, supplemented by some sharp cutting tool such as a hay-knife (Fig. 82), or an old scythe blade hafted and fitted with a foot-spur, for notching the vertical

[413]

Fig. 82.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

cuts. It is customary to replace the sod on the floor of the bog as the face is cut back, so that the rough grazing is preserved. If the sub-soil is suitable, lowland bogs are reclaimed and good cropping land secured for hay and potatoes. In Armagh strawberries, raspberries, currants and rhubarb grow excellently on the peaty soils.

In the mountain bogs of the north-east a variety of push plough known as the flachter—a word derived from the same root as "flay"—cuts off a scraw some six inches thick as it is driven by vigorous thrusts of the thighs against the stout cross-bar (Figs. 83, 84). Unlike the English breast-

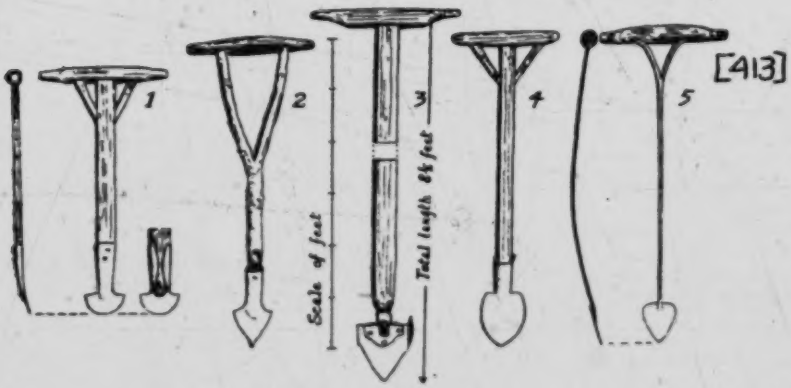

Fig. 85. Flachters.

1. Coolnagoppoge, Co. Antrim.
2. Glendun, Co. Antrim.
3. Glenravel, Co. Antrim (English type).
4. Co. Tyrone (1802).
5. Tirmeel, Co. Derry (iron shaft).

plough, the blade has no side wing. It is fastened to the shaft by the old-fashioned device of folded flanges which we have already come across in the sock of the wooden plough and in the loy. I illustrate in Fig. 85 some varieties of flachter and, for comparison, a breast-plough of English type from mid-Antrim (centre). In connexion with the short-

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

314 handled variety the story is told that on old turf-cutter at Coolnagoppoge, on seeing his first aeroplane pass overhead, reported that he had seen "the devil riding a flachter!"

314 413 The prepared turf bank may now be cut in one of two ways, either by "breasting" or by digging "underfoot." Different types of spade or "slane" are required according to which method is adopted, and within these two groups of slanes there is a multitude of regional styles and shapes. In breast-work the digger stands facing the turf bank, and thrusts in his spade horizontally, whereas in underfooting he stands on the bank and cuts vertically. Many factors enter into the distribution of these two digging-modes: the nature and grain of the peat, the depth of the face, and the local tradition. I have seen both methods used side by side on the same mountain, but I have also met foot-slanesmen who had never seen a breast-slane and vice-versa. In the thin mountain bogs the underfoot method is customary, while breasting is favoured in the deep lowland mosses. The turf slane is clearly a specialized version of the narrow loy, with the addition of a side wing to cut out the turf at one stroke. The old styles take the handle in bent-over flanges like the loy, but the new fashions of "factory" spade have borrowed the straps of the "English" digging spade (Fig. 86). Slanes were formerly made by the country smith, and the spade-factories which now forge them must cater for the demands and tastes of innumerable provinces of local culture which correspond, if one may hazard a guess, with old territorial units such as the baronies.

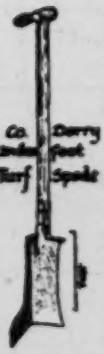

Fig. 86.

One factor in the varying shapes is the angle made by the cutting edge of the wing with the mouth of the blade: it may be at right-angles but is more likely to be set backward or forward at an angle which may be as much as 23°. In the breast-slane it tends to be set back (Fig. 89), while in the foot-slane it may be set forward at a sharp angle (Fig. 86). The edge of the wing measures anything from 4½ to 7 inches: the mouth of the spade averages 4½ inches but I have seen them up to 6 inches. Details vary so much, in fact, that to generalize is dangerous. The top or back of the wing is treated

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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in many different ways, for instance around Ballymoney it is hooked and the slanesman uses it to pull the turf-barrow into position. A foot-rest is provided on the foot-slane, on the side opposite the wing. There are left and right-footed workers, but it is not always necessary to use the foot, the strength of the arm sufficing. As with some of the loys (Chapter 13), there is a type of slane in the Midlands which has a separate spade-tree to which the handle is attached by two iron bands (Fig. 88). The spade-tree is of light wood, elm, or larch. Lightness is an essential quality in the slane: the blade is thin and sharp and weighs about 1¼ pounds. The old type of

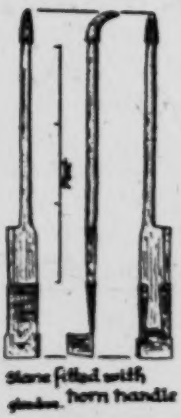

Fig. 87.

slane, like the loy, is straight handled, but it is customary to affix a cow's horn as hand-grip (Fig. 87.) Another type of handle is shown in Fig. 86.

Where the bogs are soft, especially in the area from Galway to Meath, a broad flat breast spade is employed in place of the winged slane. Its blade measures some 13 inches by 5 and it is sharpened at the sides as well as the mouth (Fig. 88). A Co. Derry variety has the edge expanded to 5½ inches: its blade is slightly dished and has a gentle rounded lift. Details of this kind assist in the penetration and with-

Fig. 88.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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drawal of the blade, and the expanded socket acts in the same way. An interesting method of hafting is found in the "diamond" breast spade of East Galway (Fig. 88) in which the handle is fitted by soaking it to expand and grip the diamond-shaped perforations in the socket. The flat breast spade has to make two separate cuts before a turf is detached from the face. It has a short handle the length of which, about 2 ft., is adjusted to the length of the user's arm.

An experienced slanesman works with astonishing precision which recalls the steady ticking of a clock, his

Fig. 89.
Top two are breast slanes.

[493]

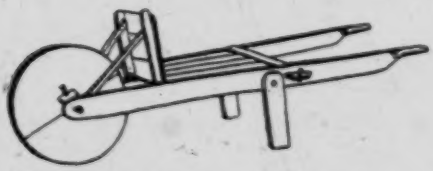

Fig. 90.

strong thrusts alternating with little jabs, designed to clean the edge of the spade, which remind the onlooker of the rhythmic anvil-tapping of the smith's hammer between his blows. Similarly the co-operation between slanesman, pitcher and spreader, or "holer," is a delightful thing to watch. But the work is hard and relentless. The severed turves may be placed directly on the barrow from the spade, or lifted off by hand two at a time and either loaded or pitched to a third hand who places them on the barrow. On deep

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

cuttings a long-handled graip is sometimes used, and the smiths turned out special two-pronged pitching forks for the purpose (Fig. 66). If the peat is soft a long-handled shovel is employed instead. A barrow-load varies in capacity, for instance it is 10 turves in parts of Antrim and 14 in Armagh. The difference depends on the dimensions of the turves as well as the size of the barrow and the state of the bog surface: turves range from about 22 inches by 4 by 5 to 10 inches by 4 by 3, but they shrink considerably as they dry. 314 413 [493]

The turf barrow is a low solid-wheeled archaic-looking vehicle (Fig. 90) the details of its construction showing as many adaptations to local conditions and traditions as the slane itself. It is a compromise between two opposing needs—a large wheel for ease of pushing over the rough bog surface and a low chassis to facilitate loading and emptying, for the barrow is merely tilted on one side by the spreader, the turves slipping off and standing on end in serried rows to dry. The barrow must be as light as possible: hence no iron is used in its construction except for the axle-ends, and, perhaps, a light tyre for the solid wheel or "trundle." In soft bogs the trundle must be wide—as much as 5 inches—but three inches is more usual. Its diameter ranges from 12 to 18 inches. The legs of the barrow are always short and may be mere lugs, or they may be absent, in which case there must be some arrangement for enabling the handles to be gripped: they are either perforated or upturned (Fig. 90). An interesting variant which I have noticed around Athenry has the legs bent backwards in a curve to act as slides or runners. A curious adaptation to soft bogland is recorded a century ago from Co. Mayo, where both horses and men were "shod with boards" when working in the moss. Box-barrows are something used to transport dried turf, or a "kish" may be placed on the flat barrow. In Armagh "carrying baskets" are employed (Fig. 91). 314 493 [492] [481]

Little can be said here about the methods adopted to dry the turf: the shapes and names of the various piles into which 314

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

3/4 the fuel is built differ from one area to another, and I give as a sample the list prepared by Mr. J. M. Mogey for Co. Antrim. After about a fortnight the spread turf is stacked in small "foots" formed by leaning a number of turves together, and later in "turn-foots" and "castles" which are built up in storeys. These are then combined into larger "rickles" or

[482]
[285]

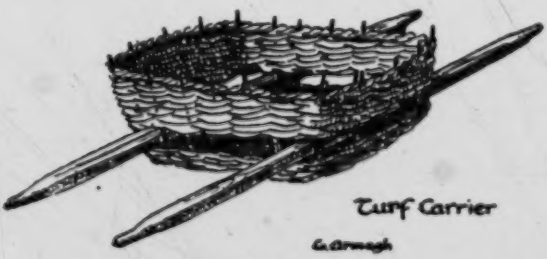

Fig. 91.

"clamps" and finally stored in "hand-stacks" erected alongside a bog road or in larger stacks built at the homestead (Fig. 93).

[413]

Fig. 92.

In many parts of the country the low-lying bogs are too wet to cut with the spade, and other methods of "winning" the turf must be adopted. Making "hand-turf" by moulding or "kneading" the black mud into balls is the simplest solution of the problem, but systematic methods have been evolved in some districts, and we give an account of the process as observed in Co. Meath, where mud turf is highly prized and considered to burn better and last longer than cut peat. It is dug in pits, broken down with short-handled shovels and graips and well mixed with water until the slushy mixture is ready to shovel into a box barrow, that is an ordinary manure barrow or a turf barrow fitted with sides, It is wheeled on to a smooth place and spread in a layer some 9 inches thick. When dry enough to take a man's weight the layer is notched in deep parallel grooves made with the edges of the hands, with cross grooves at intervals. The worker

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

walks backwards, bare-footed, during this process of "running," dipping his hands from time to time in a bucket of water to clean them. The great slab of notched turf then resembles a huge tray of treacle toffee. The brick-like slabs, some 12 inches by 4, are later cut out with a sharp flat turf spade or a hay-knife, and go through the usual processes of footing, clamping and stacking. 314

Turf stack, footings, castles, spread turf, etc. Co. Antrim.

Fig. 93.

We must now consider briefly the uses made of bog timber, chiefly "fir" (Scots pine), oak and birch. The great fir stumps are cleaved with a heavy fir-hatchet, from 5 to as much as 14 pounds in weight (Fig. 92). A "lifter" of rather unusual type is also illustrated. The resinous wood makes excellent firing and kindling, but the toughest stumps defy the axe and their twisted roots make a convenient substitute for a gate or a stop-gap. Straight-grained fir was much in demand for making "splits," that is thin strips used for lighting purposes and for making the rims and bottoms of sieves. 313 [413]

[p.204(c)]

133 here, but the original memoir[7] states that the rocks are mainly schists and gneisses, dipping at sharp angles of 30°–89°, much broken by faults and seared by sills and dikes. In short, it is a characteristic pre-Cambrian area.
● 314 Peat several feet deep is found in the basins between the numerous small hills. Many people cut "scraws," that is, the surface layers of the rough pasture. This time-hallowed practice, noted with disapproval by the Congested Districts Board inspectors 60 years ago,[8] increases year by year the area of exposed rock; it may well be that throughout the peat-consuming areas of Ireland—and of Scotland also—this has happened.[9] As one observer put it, "every

[113]

[7] Memoirs of the Geological Survey, Explanatory Memoir . . . sheets 73 and 74 (in part), 83 and 84, Dublin 1876, pp. 39–42.

[8] Congested Districts Board, Base Line Reports, Clifden district, 1891 (and many more such comments in other reports).

[9] F. Fraser Darling: West Highland Survey, London, 1955, pp. 43, 67, 272–276. See especially an interesting survey of what (in Scotland) is called "skinned land" in Lewis by M. Macdonald.

[Text continues on p. 205(B)]

[p.205(B)]

314 year the feed of a dozen sheep is burnt in the homes."

311 Agricultural life depends on the use of the "commonage," or rough pasture, 231 and the improved land, which is almost entirely drift fertilized by seaweed and 632 farmyard manure. Two-thirds of the island's 2480 acres is rough pasture, used for the sheep, cattle, ponies, and donkeys, as well as for peat collection. Figure 1 shows that the island is divided into five townlands, in each of which the commonage is shared, with the result that a farmer may take his animals not to the rough pasture near his holding but to ground as much as a mile away. There is a band of farm lands 311 stretching from lough Bofin to the har-

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

Norway and other sub-arctic regions—and from an economy where straw was not available. We have already noticed that cattle-herders in the early seventeenth century built their booley houses of boughs coated with long strips of green turf. The long sods made a portable roof which could be slung on a pole between two pack-horses.

The sods were cut in strips from carefully selected spots where a close-grazed sward gave a thick mat of grass-roots. They measure two to three feet wide and about one and a half inches thick, and as they were cut they were rolled on to a stick and carried like a carpet. Their roofing sods, wrote Thomas Campbell in 1778, 'they call scraws (they are rolled up like scrolls) but they would be better called hides, for they are flayed off the earth.'[1] In the north, where the flachter or breast-plough was used for paring sods (Chapter X), the scraws might be as much as twelve or fourteen feet long, though short turves were also used. They were carried on to the roof up two ladders and laid on grass upwards, overlapping at the ridge on the side away from the wind. They overlapped laterally also, the scraw on the windward side running over its neighbour on the lee (Fig. 14). In many such details careful attention was paid to the wind and the rain, for example the strongest purlins were put on the side whence driving rain was most to be expected. Similarly the stoutest couples were placed at the weather end of the house, and they were sometimes given a slight inclination towards the wind. A seemingly artless cabin may thus be found to show the most careful adaptation to local conditions.

The first thin layer of thatch was, in some parts of the country, sewn on to the purlins with a thatching needle—the older pattern has a large eye to take hay-rope (Fig. 15)—and the roof might then be finished in one of several regional styles. In the eastern part of Co. Down, and sporadically elsewhere, the straw is laid on in specially prepared bundles or stapples[2] (Gaelic *Stapull*) and the thatch is plastered down at eaves, gable and ridge with clay or mud. A few scollops are added at ridge and eaves. This is probably a very ancient method,

[1] Thomas Campbell, *A Philosophical Survey*, 146.
[2] K. Danaher, *Béaloideas* (1948), 203–17.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
County Fermanagh
County Antrim

PLATE 9

314
516
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412

1. Cutting turf (underfooting) in a Co. Fermanagh bog.

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417
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2. Building a peat stack, Co. Antrim.

[FACING p.144]

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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County Meath

PLATE 10

314
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[412]

1. Spreading mud turf with long-handled shovel, Co. Meath.

[516]

2. "Running" the spread turf.

[Facing p. 145]

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

XIV

TURF AND SLANE

IT should perhaps be explained that this chapter has nothing to do with horses, for the word *turf* in Ireland keeps its old meaning—as in German *torf* and French *tourbe*—and is the equivalent of the English word *peat*. Only in the extreme north-east of the country, in districts settled by Scots planters, does one hear turves cut from the bog referred to as peats. The cutting-spade, a highly specialized tool, is known as a turf-spade or sleán, a Gaelic word which may be anglicized as slane.

Moving about the Irish countryside one is never long out of sight or scent of turf. The scent arises not from the bogs themselves, which for all their accumulated decay are free of the odours of putrifaction, but from the surprisingly sweet smell of burning turf which announces their proximity. For the returning exile nothing so surely tugs at the trigger of memory: the faintest whiff of turf smoke hanging in the damp air is enough to recall the whole scene, the glowing fire on the hearth, the half-light of the kitchen, the great turf stack at the gable and all the toil that went to its making. And in the background is the bog itself, save at the cutting season a quiet empty place, holding a stillness which deepens when the curlew's cry fades away or the startled pipit drops back into the heather. Green and gold in spring, it beckons with waving bog-cotton in summer and glows with reds and russets as of a great peat fire in autumn. These are scents and scenes not readily forgotten.

The use of turf as fuel is nowadays an index of isolation and economic self-sufficiency. Mechanical excavation of fuel for power plants is being successfully applied by Bord na Mona (the Irish Turf Board) but for domestic fuel nothing can replace

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the costly hand-cutting, -wheeling, and -turning. The calorific value of peat is less than half that of coal, and its bulk makes transport costs high. Small coal-boats put in at harbours all round the coast, and in the larger towns, whose adjacent supplies were early exhausted, coal has been the chief fuel since the days when Dean Swift vainly advised the Irish to burn everything English except their coal. During the second world war, however, even Dublin had to depend on turf brought from the west and stacked in immense piles in Phoenix Park. Some peat is still burnt in the towns, especially in the interior of the country, but it is in the small farms that the bulk of the annual turf harvest is consumed. So necessary was a supply of peat in former times that proximity to a turf bog was a factor in land values. As to the antiquity of its use as fuel in Ireland we have little evidence, though Pliny describes its preparation in ancient Germany. Petty tells us in the second half of the seventeenth century that 'their fuel is turf in most places',[1] although Professor O'Brien, writing of the same century states that 'until the woods began to sink to very small proportions, turf was not at all employed for heating.'[2] The difficulty is that such a lowly pursuit as peat-cutting is not likely to be mentioned in the Irish law texts, and if we rely on documentary evidence alone we might suppose that all sorts of ancient practices were introduced by the English who first described them. To judge from the bright red ashes one frequently sees in the excavated hearths of Dark Age habitations peat was used as firing before history begins in upland areas and along the wind-swept coasts. But we may accept the view that over most of the country turf-cutting on its historic scale developed, probably under the stimulus of improved techniques brought in by English settlers, after the major forest clearances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is evidence from some parts of the country, for the eighteenth century, that the cutting of peat for winter use was one of the occupations of transhumant herders who took their livestock to the bog pastures in summer.[3] But it is unreasonable to suppose that the great labour involved

[1] Sir W. Petty, *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (1691), 82.
[2] G. O'Brien, *The Economic History of Ireland in the Seventeenth Century*, 44.
[3] W. Harris, *The Ancient and Present State of the County of Down*, 125.

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would have been undertaken so long as supplies of timber were available, though Petty observed that 'the cutting and carriage of turf was easier than that of wood.'[1] We may think of turf as supplementing and then coming to replace wood fuel, though in fact some wood is still very desirable to supplement the slow-burning turf, especially the quick-burning gorse and bog-fir which are the most readily available sources in treeless areas.

It is calculated that at least one fifth of the country is coated with bog, but a small proportion of this could be classed as reclaimed bog. It occurs not only in all the mountain areas but also, and more conspicuously, in the ill-drained hollows of the lowlands where glacial deposits had blocked the natural flow of waters or human occupation had brought about environmental changes. It is estimated that in recent years over 5 million tons of dried domestic fuel have been cut annually, representing a weight as cut of some 40 million tons. At this rate the supply is reckoned to last for 500 years, but this makes no allowance for the increasing exploitation of peat for the thermal generation of electricity and for the extraction of by-products. There is, however, a slow accretion of peat in many areas, though this consists mostly of sphagnum peat and the good-quality fen and forest peats of the deeper bogs are not being replaced. In fact these deeper layers tend to remain untapped either because the water cannot be drained away, or because layers of tree-stumps defy the attacks of both spade and mechanical digger.

The main causative factor in bog-formation is waterlogged soil, which checks the decomposition of vegetable remains. It therefore depends to a considerable extent on climate and on the balance between precipitation and evaporation. It is generally held that past phases of bog-growth can be correlated with periods of climatic deterioration, and horizons which are believed to mark the changed conditions can be traced in most of the deep bogs. In Scandinavia the most important of such 'recurrence horizons' has been dated by pollen-analysts and archaeologists to about 400 B.C.: the stormy sub-Atlantic climate whose beginning is thus chronicled is believed to have improved somewhat early in the Christian era, but to have suffered two further periods of worsening about A.D. 400 and

[1] Sir W. Petty, op. cit., 82.

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A.D. 1300. Attempts to extend this chronological scheme to cover Ireland have not been successful, and the current view is that some at least of the recurrence horizons should be attributed to ecologic changes brought about by human action which led to the redistribution of water and the blocking of drainage. Admittedly the basal Boreal peats of lowland bogs, and the Atlantic peats which succeeded them, must have been formed without any appreciable human interference, for in those periods traces of man are either absent or few and limited in distribution, but from sub-Boreal times onwards, after 2500 B.C., we have to reckon with human societies equipped with tools and domestic animals capable of working far-reaching changes in environmental conditions. The blanket bogs which cover the mountain slopes and in the west spread indiscriminately over hundreds of square miles of upland and lowland alike are admittedly associated with areas of heavy precipitation and high humidity, but the significant fact is that some of them can be shown to have been initiated in sub-Boreal times following extensive clearance of the woodlands which previously grew there. Walking over the upland bogs, I have stepped on to the roofing slab of a great stone monument which once stood seven feet clear of the ground: it had been completely engulfed in peat formed since its erection. Study of the bottom layer of this bog showed that it contained pollen grains of cereal type and of weeds of cultivation such as ribwort plantain.[1] Leaching of soils exposed by shallow cultivation and the formation of iron-pan seem to have followed human occupation of the sandy moraines and residual soils to which early man was attracted by their dryness and by the lightness of their forest cover. The extensive areas affected, despite the presumably small population, may be explained if we suppose that cultivation was temporary and that settlements were moved every few years.

These blanket bogs are rarely more than six or eight feet thick and many stretches have been reduced by turf cutting and erosion to a mere skin with occasional residual hags betraying their former depth. The so-called raised bogs of the lowlands, in contrast, are not easily cut-out: they are often very deep,

[1] G. F. Mitchell, *P.R.I.A.*, 53B (1951), 159.

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averaging some twenty feet, and they have had a far longer life. In their natural condition their surface is slightly convex, and they may come to stand, perversely, above the level of the surrounding countryside, though they began life in ill-drained hollows where reeds grew to make fen-peat. These lower layers tend to be alkaline in nature and when the upper layers are cut away the bogs may be turned into productive cropland if adequate drainage can be provided. Small areas of this type occur to the south of Lough Neagh, but Ireland has nothing to compare with the English fenlands. Yet the Irish bogs take their place in the agricultural economy as summer grazing grounds, formerly for mixed stock and for cattle in particular, latterly mainly for sheep. In the past, too, considerable use was made of buried timber dug from the bogs,[1] of oak for roofing beams and of pine for kindling and resinous 'splits' to give light. The long 'trying iron' with which buried timber was located is shown in Fig. 66, together with the massive 'fir hatchet' and 'fir rooter'.

To the ecologist the bogs provide a unique field of research into the history of the occupation of the country by plants, animals and man. In the waterlogged depths of the peats everything is preserved, even the tiniest seeds and insects. Centuries of successive summers are chronicled in countless pollens of trees and grasses which the botanist can identify and thereby reconstruct the changes of vegetation from prehistoric times down to the recent past. When man appeared on the scene not only did he leave his pathways and possessions in the bogs, but, as we have seen, he was an agent in their growth. His tools of stone and copper, bronze and iron, evolving in that order, are found lying at levels which can be correlated with the vegetation-history by analysing the pollens that cling to them. Thanks to the labours of Knud Jessen and Frank Mitchell we now have an approximate chronological sequence of landscapes and human cultures in Ireland going back several thousand years.

The pollen grains from the lowest layers of the upland bogs include those of shrubs such as hazel, birch, rowan and thorn, as well as, occasionally, those of cereals and the weeds of cultivation. Evidently the clearings soon became threatened with forest and field weeds, and these companions of the earliest

[1] E. E. Evans, *Irish Heritage*, 142; A. T. Lucas, *Béaloideas*, 23, 71–134.

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137 farmers, both the flowers of the fields and the shrubs of the
314 forest edge, took on a special significance which they have retained in the peasant mind to the present day. There is powerful magic in the flowers of May, in the hazel twig, the fairy birch, the rowan branch and above all in the flowering hawthorn. This most beautiful of trees first became common in the Neolithic period. In a later chapter we shall consider some of the enduring spiritual aspects of man's association with this environment of his own making. At about this time, too, when the Neolithic economy was both absorbing the older population and being supplemented by metal tools, pollen studies reveal a marked decline of the elm tree which has been explained by the use of its bark and branches as cattle fodder. The oak forests, however, persisted in strength, and were presumably treasured for their supply of pig-fattening mast. Alder also was abundant, occupying soils which were too damp to be cultivated.

The onset of the sub-Atlantic climatic deterioration in the last millennium B.C. seems to have accelerated the peat-forming processes. Both oak and elm decline, but the birch tree spreads widely. In County Antrim, for instance, extensive oak forests growing up to heights of 1,000 feet were overwhelmed in the spreading bogs. The pine had become rare by the end of prehistoric times, though it may have lingered into the historic period on sandy eskers and on the dried surfaces of some of the raised bogs. Despite climatic change and human interference, considerable oak and alder forests survived here and there into the seventeenth century, but these last remnants of the Irish forests were almost all destroyed by the military and economic demands of that troubled century. Among the many consequences was the almost universal exploitation of the peat bogs for fuel. In addition great quantities of turf were consumed by the linen bleachers from the late eighteenth century, and kilns for burning lime and bricks and for drying agricultural produce made considerable demands on the bogs. A minor traditional
[372] use which may be mentioned in passing was for the preparation of charcoal for smith's work. The peat was charred in pits.

314 For all its toil turf-cutting provides a welcome break from
786 the routine of farmwork, a time when friends and neighbours come together away from the familiar surroundings of fields

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and houses. There is a marked loosening of inhibitions at this time. The occasion is something of a festival, of picnic meals and keen appetites, so that tea is said to taste better at turf-cutting than at any other time. After the March winds and the lengthening days of spring have dried the bog surface there is a stirring in the homesteads, the well-worn tools are pulled out of their hiding-places and the smith is kept busy repairing spades and barrows. Bright new tools litter the town pavements on fair day, and the countryman chooses his new slane with an exhibition of caution that seems superfluous until one remembers that an ounce of weight or an inch of length can make the difference between smooth ease and back-break. April, everywhere the driest month of the year, is the best month for cutting: an early start gives the turves a better chance of drying, but the planting of crops keeps the men busy till the end of the month, so that May is the likeliest time to see them in the bogs. There is an old belief that to facilitate drying, peat should be cut when the moon is waning (Pl. 9, 1).

A whiff of turf smoke drifting from a hidden fire where the tea is brewed is the first sign that the bog is peopled. If it is a deep bog you will look in vain for signs of activity, but once you have been seen dozens of heads pop up from deep cuttings and the diggers welcome a break for a smoke and a 'crack'. Turbary rights are extremely complicated, but with the decreasing demand for turf there is little dissension even when banks are communally owned. Nowadays each family generally has its own bank or cutting-face, but it is customary for two or three families to pool their labour and work at each bank in turn. The owner of the bank by tradition provides food for the helpers. On the average a week's cutting provides sufficient fuel for each family, but the time taken and the amount required depend on the nature of the bog and on the quality of the turf. Ideally the season's cut should contain a proportion of brown top turf, that is light sphagnum peat for summer firing, and a proportion of black bottom peat for winter use: this is moist humified peat which dries hard as a brick and burns almost like coal. The amount required is measured by the load, that is the load of a small one-horse cart. I was told in Donegal that a good team of four men, cutting, lifting, wheeling and spreading,

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314 [461] could account for twenty-five loads in a day, but, my informant added, 'they would need to be strong in the back and weak in the head'; as at corn harvest competitive cutting and 'striving' brought intense excitement and severe strain.

'Opening up' a bank involves first of all the removal of the top layer of tough fibrous peat—'flow' or 'fum'—to a depth of a foot or so. It grows heather, tough grasses or mosses and makes poor firing, though there are districts, especially on the islands, which have exhausted their turf and burn nothing but the even more fibrous sods or 'rough-heads' skinned off the rocks. The common spade is usually employed for opening a face, supplemented often by a sharp nicking tool, a hay-knife [412] or a portion of an old scythe-blade hafted for the purpose. In parts of north Ulster the thin top-layer of the mountain bogs is removed with a small variant of the breast-plough known as a flachter or flaying-spade, one of the tools which this region shares with western Scotland (Fig. 45). The term breast-plough is a euphemism, for it is really a groin-plough, pushed forward by thrusts of the thighs and groin.

The bog parings are generally spread on the cut-over bog below the bank, where they give a dry footing for the barrow-men wheeling away the turves. The pared sods in time consolidate, so that the rough grazing of the bog is preserved at a lower level. Conditions vary considerably from one bog to another, and so do the methods of working and the shapes of the tools. The minutiae of the craft are so perfected that a team of diggers works with the rhythm of a machine. Strong arms are required—a single turf may weigh up to 20 lb. when cut—but experience and a good eye are necessary for speed, and skilled 'slanesmen' are becoming scarce. Great importance was attached to 'keeping a straight face', that is keeping the cutting face vertical, and a poor digger was referred to as a 'clod-cutter'. To break a turf was almost a crime: in the old days 'they'd have thrown you out of the bog'. Not only do broken turves double the handling each time they are lifted or turned, but they tend to break adjacent turves when stacked, and the stack will show by its shape if the turf has been badly cut. At the end of the bank it is customary, in the north, to leave three steps of turf uncut. They enable one to scramble out on to the

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uncut bog above, but one suspects that behind the custom there lies the widespread notion that a task should never be completely finished and that a small portion of anything taken by man should be left for luck or the fairies. You will be told that the steps are cut to avoid the curse of Columbkille, for it is said that the saint was once trapped in a bog hole and laid a curse on all who did not cut the three steps.

There are two methods of cutting, vertically or 'underfooting' and horizontally or 'breasting', and they tend to be used respectively on thin upland and deep lowland bogs, though these have to be cut underfoot if badly drained unless a platform or 'foot-go' of flow turf can be built up for the breaster to stand on. Also, the upper layers of brown turf which preserve some of the tough plant fibres are easier to cut vertically. Breasting not only imposes less strain on the back but speeds up the work, since the turves can be retained on the slane and placed directly on the barrow. (The vertical digger can do this only if his spade has a lift, that is bends forward.) In consequence the breast-cutter's turf-barrow will be designed for his convenience, for example it commonly has no legs so that he can swing it into position laterally by hooking the wing of his spade over the handle. Slanes, as well as barrows, will be found to vary in some slight degree from one bog to another, and a seemingly trivial difference can generally be explained in terms of differences of local conditions and techniques: the human ecology of the bogs is no less interesting than the plant ecology. In essentials the turf slane is a narrow straight-shafted steel blade with a wing set at right-angles after the manner of a cheese-knife, which is said, indeed, to owe its origin to 'an ingenious cutler of Dublin' who borrowed the idea from the slane.[1] The purpose of the wing is to detach a complete turf at a single stroke of the spade. The breadth and length of blade and wing are variables depending on many factors, but mainly on the size of turf required, and this in turn is determined to a considerable extent by the nature of the bog. If it is a very wet bog, for example, the turves must be cut larger than normal to allow for greater shrinkage on drying. When absolutely dry peat will shrink to less than one-eighth its original volume, and though air-dried peat still contains

[1] Thomas Campbell, *A Philosophical Survey of the South of Ireland*, 96

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●314 412 about 25 per cent water, when cut it may have 90 per cent or more. Again, some kinds of peat come away easily so that the turves can be cut somewhat larger than the dimensions of the slane, which for ease of working is naturally made as small and light as possible.

Increasingly in this as in every other department of rural labour, standardized implements are gaining ground, but the Irish spade factories still cater for scores of different tastes. When slanes were smith-forged almost every turf-cutter had his individual tool, made to measure. The factory-made slane weighs about 3¾ lb., but the old-style slane was merely a thin sheath of steel wrapped around a wooden blade and weighing about 1½ lb. It comprised four parts, blade, spade-tree, shaft and hilt, though shaft and spade-tree were sometimes in one piece, the shaft flattening out to enter the blade in a long 'web' (Fig. 62, 1). The thick round shaft, which had to be truly centred in the blade, was polished smooth as a piston with peaty sweat rubbed in. The two-piece haft, with separate spade-tree (No. 2), gave a certain springiness which eased the work. In the same

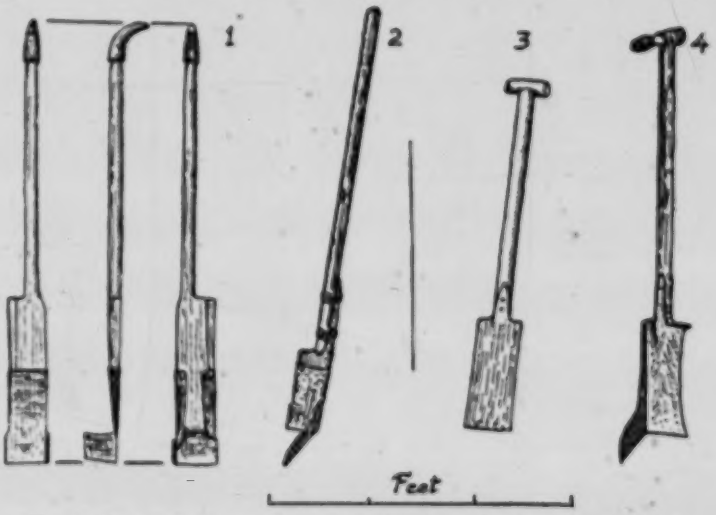

Fig. 62. Slanes old and new. Nos. 1 (Co. Antrim) and 3 (Co. Down) are breast spades; Nos. 2 (Co. Galway) and 4 (Co. Londonderry) are underfoot.

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way a separate hilt, frequently a cow's horn well polished by use, saved the strain on the palm of the hand, but many slanesmen preferred a handle shaped to their own taste and to the needs of the cutting technique required. In the Antrim Glens I have seen a bent piece of black sally carefully spliced on: this wood is said to have the virtue of absorbing sweat. The blade itself widens towards the cutting edge which is from four to six inches in width, the splay preventing the spade from sticking in the wet peat. The cutting edge of the wing is anything from four to seven inches long, and the top edge is finished in a variety of pleasing shapes and is often notched with the proprietary marks of the owner.

A breast slane can as a rule be distinguished from the underfoot by the upward slant of the cutting edge of the wing as viewed from the side with the spade held vertically, whereas the wing of the underfoot slane slopes down. This ensures that the face of the bog which is left after cutting shall be vertical when breasting and horizontal when underfooting, for the strokes are naturally made with a slight downward slope in the former case and a forward slope in the latter. Another difference is that the underfoot slane is normally provided with a foot-step on one side or the other, depending on whether the user is left or right handed. In practice the foot is not used, however, unless the peat is very tough and little humified. Bits of fibrous matter (called fog, cat or 'old wife's tow') clogging the cutting edge are troublesome, but it is kept clean by a quick preliminary jab into the peat, which reminds one of the rhythmic anvil-tapping of the blacksmith. Modern slanes tend to have the blade made all in one piece, riveted to the haft with straps and fitted with a narrow foot-plate on the side away from the wing. (Fig. 62, 4.) The breast slane has been partly replaced, especially in wet bogs, by a short-handled flat spade which cuts larger peats (Fig. 62, 3). They are of a good shape for stacking and for transport on the canal-boats and, latterly, the lorries which supply Dublin with turf.

For taking the cut peats to the spread-field two wheelers and turf barrows are the minimum needs. The severed turves may be placed directly from the spade on to the waiting barrow, but a loader is more often required, lifting two turves at a

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time: his finger marks can still be seen when the dried turves are burning in the fire. In deep bogs the lifter may use a long-handled fork (Fig. 66, 2) or shovel, pitching the turves for the barrowman to load. A barrow load is anything from ten to twenty peats. Apparently crude and artless, the turf barrow is well designed for its purpose, and it shows many adaptations to local conditions and traditions (Fig. 63). It is slatted for lightness and is made almost entirely of wood, yet it must be strong enough to take heavy loads over rough ground: it should be low and flat for convenience in loading and unloading, yet it needs a large broad wheel for pushing over an uneven surface. Legs may be dispensed with, reduced to lugs or swept back to serve as runners. Again the shape of the handles and the slope of the front board depend on the method of loading and tipping, over the side or over the front. Every detail of the design is in answer to a general or local problem. If the ground is very rough or soft the barrow must be pulled, not pushed, and in extreme cases its place is taken by a slipe. In Antrim alone there are several varieties of turf slipe. All are slatted lengthwise—because the peats are loaded transversely—and are fitted with short corner posts and tipping handles. An interesting variant—the roller slipe—has been recorded but is no longer seen: it had two rollers fitted under the body of the sledge.[1] The dried peats also may be transported, if the bog is soft, on a slipe (Fig. 58, 5) or in a carrying basket (Fig. 57).

Despite ingenious shifts towards greater speed the spreading and drying of turf are inefficient because of the time taken in wheeling and handling and the great difficulty of drying turf which is spread on almost saturated surfaces. In exceptionally wet summers the peats do not dry out, and tragedy may follow if the winter is severe. It is then that the countryside is stripped of what little timber it can provide, and before coal was obtainable anything from furniture to fishbones and cowdung was utilized to boil the pot. In bogless districts dung was quite regularly used: there are several accounts of it in travel records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed in the treeless islands dung was until recently carefully harvested, gathered in piles in the fields in spring, and sometimes worked with the

[1] E. E. Evans in *Aspects of Archaeology* (Ed. W. F. Grimes), plate 2a.

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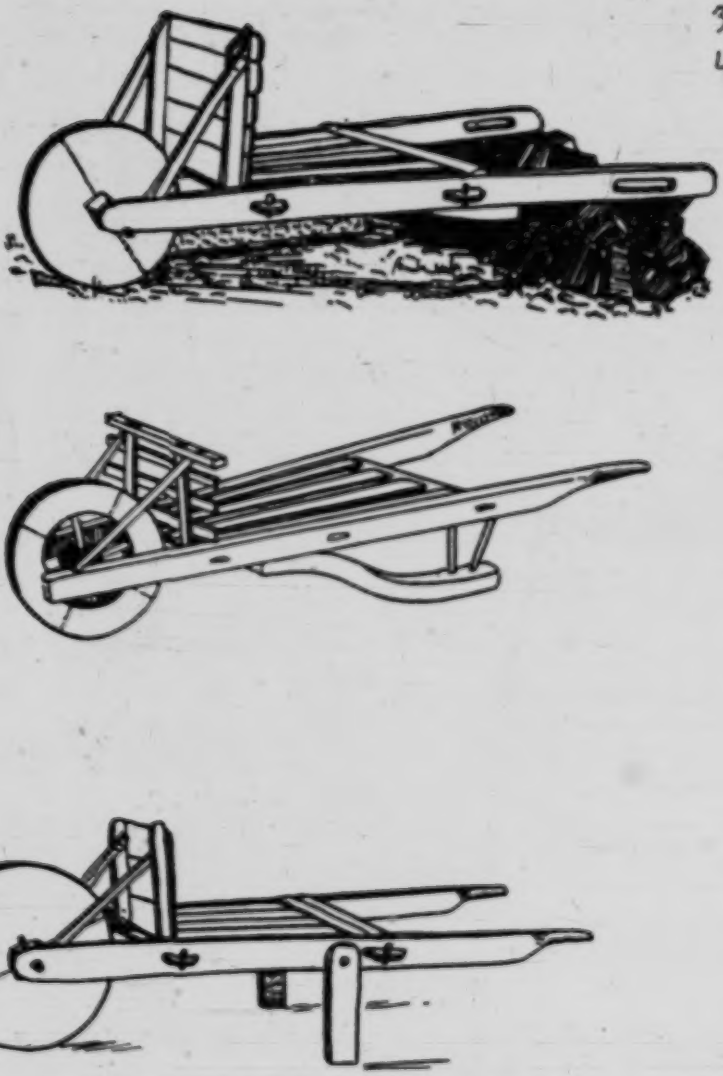

Fig. 63. Turf barrows from Cos. Meath, Donegal and Antrim

hands into cakes and piled against a wall until dry enough to carry home.[1]

After lying spread on the ground for a week or two the turves are footed, that is a dozen or so are put to lean together in the shape of a pitched roof, to catch the wind (Fig. 64). This is work for women and for children, who are, in some districts, given a week's holiday from school. Through the months of June and July and often into August there is constant coming and going as the peats are turned and built into larger and larger piles, turn-foots, castles, rickles, lumps and clamps—the names and the shapes show considerable regional variation—until they can be ricked or stacked on the bog ready to be carried to the farms as opportunity offers. The wind is the main drying agent, and once dried the peats acquire a waterproof skin. A well-built stack will throw off the rain, but it is usual in the west to thatch with rushes and add a coping of sods or stones against the wind. Open-sided turfsheds specially built of wood or stone are the exception rather than the rule. A favourite place for the stack is against the house gable, where it provides a protective warmth even before the turf is burnt. The fuel is taken into the house in baskets, creels or wights, and a small supply is kept handy by the fireside or stored, as in the Aran Islands, on the kitchen loft (Pl. 9, 2).

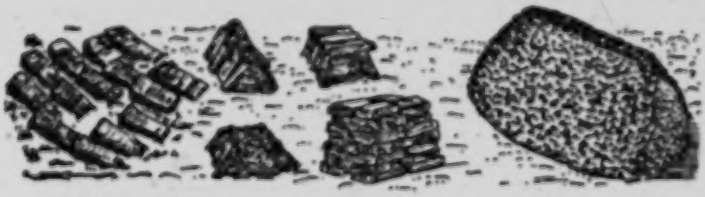

FIG. 64. Stages in the drying and stacking of turf (not to scale; the stack, right, is about 9 feet high).

Some lowland bogs are too waterlogged to be cut into turves, and if no slane-turf is available the black turf-mud is moulded by hand into bricks or balls which are stacked to dry. In some counties, for instance Meath and Cavan, mud turf is highly prized and its preparation follows a well-ordered routine. After

[1] C. R. Browne and A. C. Haddon, *The Aran Islands*.

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removing the sods over a rectangular area the turf is dug over to a spit's depth and worked into a slush with forks and bare feet, water being added if necessary. The slush is shovelled into box barrows and spread out to dry in a layer about nine inches thick. The process is repeated, a spit at a time, until the bottom of the bog or the water table is reached. After a few days, when the layer of black mud is hard enough to bear a man's weight, it is marked out in criss-cross grooves made with the edges of the hands, the bare-footed 'baker' or 'runner' walking backwards during the process and dipping his hands from time to time in water to clean them (Plate 10). The turf bricks marked out in this way are separated with a sharp spade, much as the Romans are said to have cut out their bricks, and they are then laid on end, footed, clamped and stacked in the ordinary way. Gerald Boate's description of the making of mud turf in the first half of the seventeenth century shows how little the methods have changed. 'They fall to the business, dividing it so among the labourers, that one part of them do dig out the earth, or rather the mud, and by spadesfull cast it on a heap, either by the side of the pit or somewhere within the same, where others stand, who very well work it, turning it to and fro, and then with their shovels fill it into certain wooden trays, amongst the English in Ireland peculiarly called lossels; the which being full, another part of the labourers draw the same, with great cords fastened to them, to some dry place within the bog . . . where having poured out the mud, they go back to fetch more, and so go to and fro all day long. On that dry place . . . sit certain women upon their knees, who mould the mud, using nothing else but their hands . . . the turf is fashioned flat and broad beneath, growing narrower towards the top; which being done, the turf is let lie upon the ground the space of a week or more . . . and being reasonably well dried, it is piled up in little heaps, leaving everywhere empty spaces between, that the air and the wind passing through them, they may dry the sooner.' He adds that two women moulders were sufficient to keep twenty men at work.[1]

From time to time the worker in the bogs comes across objects lost or buried there as the bog was growing, and we saw above

[1]G. Boate, *Ireland's Natural History* (1652), 155.

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how these are used by the pollen-specialists to build up a bog chronology. Some, like the magnificent gold ornaments of the Bronze Age, were deposited in the bogs, or in lakes where the bogs later grew, for magical purposes. Other objects were sometimes hidden in the hope of being recovered, and still others were thrown into a bog hole when they were worn out. All have been almost perfectly preserved by the peat, whether made of metal or organic material such as wood, leather or clothing. None of the discoveries which occasionally astonish the turf-cutter and relieve the monotony of his labours is more mysterious than the 'bog butter' which is found in wooden vessels or baskets, occasionally in containers of cloth, bark or skin, in quantities ranging from a few pounds to as much as a hundredweight (Fig. 65). During the first half of last century,

FIG. 65. Methers and wooden cups (Belfast Museum). The first example, from Co. Londonderry, contains bog butter. The cups are from the Aran Islands.

when the pressure of population and industrial needs led to immense inroads on the turf bogs, an astonishing number of finds was made. The 'butter' was a perquisite of the finder, and there are records of its being taken to the fair to be sold as grease for wheel-cars, which, like the 'singing carts' of Spain, were very noisy. In fact it resembles lard rather than butter and analysis shows that its composition has changed, but there can be no doubt that it was originally butter. There are many references to the practice of burying butter in bogs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the explanations offered are also many. Petty thought it was done in order to

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make the butter rancid, since the Irish, he says, preferred strong butter.[1] An eighteenth century writer states that some of the buried butter was

> So strong, a dog with help of wind,
> By scenting out, with ease might find.[2]

Others have claimed that it was buried to mature and purify it, and one writer has seen an explanation in the need to have butter available at Lent. It is reasonable to suppose that the surplus butter of summer would be stored in this way once the preservative properties of peat were known, but the practice is certainly pre-Christian in origin. None of the Irish finds has been securely dated—the majority of the wooden containers have an ageless 'medieval' appearance—but a discovery in Skye was satisfactorily dated to the very beginning of the Christian era (it contained not only cowhairs but some strands from the head of a fair-haired dairymaid).[3] I am inclined to think that a practice which came to be generally adopted for utilitarian reasons had its origin in magic, and that deposits were originally made in the hope of appeasing the powers of evil and inducing an abundant flow of milk from the pastures.[4] The custom may well have originated during the crisis of the climatic deterioration in the last centuries of the pre-Christian era. Surviving folklore is full of the magic properties of butter, and in the west of Ireland it is known that lumps of butter were thrown into loughs and springs through which cattle were driven in order to restore them to health. It seems from the accounts of discoveries in the bogs that some of the butter containers had been thrown into a bog hole rather than buried. Later, no doubt, it became the practice to bury butter in order to preserve it, but if this had always been so I cannot think that there would have been so many unclaimed deposits left to await the slane of the turf-cutter. It should be noticed that the custom of preserving butter in bogs or in moist earth is found also in Scandinavia, Iceland, India and Morocco.[5] It is interesting that bog butter

[1]Sir W. Petty, *The Political Anatomy of Ireland*, 82.
[2]W(illiam) M(offatt), *The Western Isle*, Canto 2.
[3]J. Ritchie, *P.S.A.S.*, 75, 5–22.
[4]E. E. Evans, *U.J.A.*, 10, 59–65.
[5]ibid., 59.

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FIG. 66. Some tools used in the bog. (1) Trying iron for locating buried timber, Co. Cork. (2) Turf fork, Co. Armagh. (3) Fir-hatchet or 'finhow', Co. Armagh. (4) Fir-rooter, Co. Galway.

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contains no salt, but the explanation may be that it was difficult to obtain and that its addition was not necessary when the butter was preserved by burying it. This is confirmed by the following quotation which shows also that the custom of preserving butter in a bog-hole was still remembered a generation ago in Co. Limerick. Lady Carbery writes: 'In their grandfather's time, butter, flavoured with wild garlic and unsalted (salt cost too much to buy except in small quantities) used to be put in a bog-hole and left to ripen.'[1]

[1]M. Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur*, 198.

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were poor and there were no wheeled vehicles, or where there was no horse for a slide-car, the burden rope was all that was required to carry home the harvest; distances were mercifully small on the tiny farms. Rushes for rope making were cut when fully grown, beetled with a mell and broken by hand to rid them of pith. They were then spread to dry and afterwards tied in bundles ready to be fashioned into ropes when wintry weather brought indoor leisure. Ropes made of cowhair as well as horsehair, sometimes mixed with seasoned sedge (sprit) once found many uses about the farm. Horsehair fishing lines and snares for seabirds are described elsewhere, but we may refer here to snares for small birds which in south Armagh, for example, are laid on the grass in hard wintry weather over a scattering of grain or breadcrumbs. Inside the frame of a pegged string or a bent sally rod are tied a dozen or more snares made of single or double horsehair. By this means blackbirds, thrushes, sparrows, and finches are caught by the feet, nowadays for sport but, no doubt, once as a welcome addition to the food supply. Similar horsehair snares for catching small birds are known from England and, further afield, from the Sudan. Reins of horsehair are said to have been common quite recently in Donegal, and I would hazard a guess that horsehair nets, such as were made in Harris (Martin Martin tells us) for catching seals, were formerly made there.

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Mats and baskets of many kinds were fashioned from straw and other materials such as marram grass. This tough grass is harvested in places all around the coast and put to many uses, including thatching. It is cut below the surface of the sandy dunes, and in Donegal I have seen a toothed sickle used for the purpose. The techniques of constructing mats and baskets of these materials are closely related and seem to fall into three classes, sown plaits, built-up plaits and coiled work. Coiled basketry is best represented in the once universal bee-skep, in the seed-baskets of the south, the seats and armchairs of the west, and in the food-carrying baskets of the Aran Islands (Fig. 69). It is an interesting detail of their construction that a bone pin is used to insert the ties, which are usually made of split briar. The conical hens' nests hung on pegs on the kitchen walls (Fig. 16) are also constructed in a coil technique, but

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